

Research Network “Governance in China” and Association for Social Science Research in China (ASC) Joint Conference

Freie Universität Berlin, November 21–22, 2014

Last year’s annual conference of the Research Network “Governance in China” and the Association for Social Science Research in China was organized by the Institute of China Studies at Freie Universität Berlin.

In the first panel, Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) and Philipp Rotmann (Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin) commented on papers dealing with China’s position towards “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) and new aspects of its foreign policy. Rosemary Foot (Oxford University) traced the Chinese government’s concerns during the norm’s emergence and argued that its approach to R2P would center on economic development, especially infrastructure, in which the state plays a key role. Maximilian Mayer (Universität Bonn) and Mikko Huotari (MERICS, Berlin) similarly identified the building of infrastructure as a key trend. They argued that China’s investment in both “classical” (e.g. transportation facilities) and “avant-garde” infrastructures (financial and cyber networks) needs to be accounted for when assessing China’s international role.

In the second panel, Genia Kostka (Hertie School of Governance, Berlin) discussed Doris Fischer (Universität Würzburg), Gang Shuge (Beijing Academy of Social Sciences), and Andrea Funke’s (Universität Würzburg) project on women entrepreneurs in China. Analyzing a diverse sample of interviewees, they identified three factors that led to women entrepreneurship: Crisis of livelihood, increase in human capital and competitiveness as well as increased self-confidence. Bettina Gransow (Freie Universität Berlin) discussed Katja Levy’s (Freie Universität Berlin, Universität Würzburg) project on media practices of lawyers in China. First interviews with Chinese lawyers revealed social media practice routines that are part of political deliberative procedures. Levy argues that weiquan lawyers, as opposed to other lawyers using social media, do not consider domestic media as helpful allies but would rather rely on foreign media.

In the third panel, Gunter Schubert (Universität Tübingen) discussed papers by André Beckershoff (Universität Tübingen) and Jens Damm (Chang Jung University, Tainan, Taiwan) dealing with cross-strait civil society networks. Approaching the recent Sunflower-Movement from a Gramscian perspective, Beckershoff argues that the young protesters attempted to repoliticize the lately depoliticized cross-strait relations. Damm notes that social movements in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora have become interlinked. His empirical data leads him to conclude that because of cultural, political and social cleavages between the two sites a cross-strait public sphere has only partially been established. Gang Shuge commented on Astrid Lipinsky’s (Universität Wien) research on cross-strait contacts and exchanges between women and women’s NGOs. Lipinsky’s empirical data indicates almost no exchanges between Taiwanese and Chinese NGOs due to structural obstacles as well as a lack of a suitable counterparts and shared interests.

In the fourth panel, Anna Ahlers (Oslo University) commented on Hans-Christian Schnack’s (Universität Duisburg-Essen) case study examining school-based decision-making under the street-level bureaucracy framework. Schnack finds a beneficial ambivalence in the currently low accountability in ethnic minority language education, enabling local diversity as a promise to ethnic minorities while simultaneously securing that diversified curricula still adhere to the state’s educational policies.

In the fifth panel, Bettina Gransow commented on Sabrina Habich’s (Universität Tübingen) research on reservoir resettlement. Habich finds that although this policy process is becoming

more pluralized it is geared towards the protection and continuation of hydropower development and a firm control of policymaking by state actors. Björn Alpermann (Universität Würzburg) commented on two projects dealing with urbanization policy and local political change in rural China. Elena Meyer-Clement (Universität Tübingen) investigates how national and provincial urbanization policies structure local politics. She finds that although rural agglomeration policy seems to increase political responsiveness of local governments to the demands of the population, central demands of upper-level plans and land quotas are severely thwarting these developments, thus leading to a high risk of failure of policy implementation on the local level. Sally Sargeson's paper (The Australian National University) analyzes links between changes in property and democracy. She establishes a causal relationship between collective land ownership and greater procedural and substantive democracy. She concludes that collective ownership and the related processes of administration generate incentives for villagers to choose higher quality democracy in order to safeguard their collective rights, while the acquisition of individual assets seems to lower the democratic quality by weakening participatory incentives and opportunities for monitoring.

The conference set-up was different from previous years: Conference papers were shared beforehand and each paper was presented and discussed by a peer. The discussion set off with the paper giver replying to the discussant's comments before the floor was opened for a general discussion. This format allowed the authors to see if there might still be a need for clarification. Besides that, research projects in their initial stages were put up for discussion which led to a lively exchange over research methods and theoretical frameworks, possible further aspects of the research projects and links between research fields, all ultimately contributing to the improvement of the projects. All in all, the conference provided ample opportunity for academic exchange across a wide range of different China-related issues.

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